

the legacy

caroline bond



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Published in hardback in Great Britain in 2021 by Corvus,
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978 1 83895 282 2

Trade paperback ISBN: 978 1 78649 928 8

E-book ISBN: 978 1 78649 927 1

Printed in Great Britain

Corvus
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.corvus-books.co.uk

To Alex, Rachel and Geena.

We promise not include too many surprises in the will.

Chapter 1

RACHEL HEWSON was nervous – which was unlike her. In her twenty-six years as a solicitor she'd drafted innumerable wills and overseen the distribution of hundreds of thousands of pounds of assets: property, investments, jewellery, boats, shares in race horses and, in one memorable case, three fields of rare-breed pigs. During that time she'd witnessed all manner of behaviour by the family and friends of the deceased, from the truly appalling to the impressively magnanimous. She'd seen greed and generosity, meanness and big-heartedness, connivance and cooperation. A death tended to bring out the best, and the worst, in humanity – although, in her experience, most people didn't so much change as become more exaggerated versions of their true selves. But in all her years spent administering the last wishes of the dead, she'd never before been asked to put together a will like Jonathan Coulter's.

He'd phoned the firm, out of the blue, one morning in early June and asked *to be put through to a senior partner*. Rachel – who was the *only* senior partner at the firm, now Charles had finally

retired – had taken the call. It was a short conversation, focused mainly on her availability to oversee the drafting of a new will, *as soon as practicably possible*. Mr Coulter had been adamant that she must personally conduct the whole process, *from beginning to end*, including working with the executors after his death. Rachel had reassured him on all counts, though she'd pointed out that it was difficult to commit to being available to assist the executors in their responsibilities, given that the date of 'implementation' was impossible to predict. His final question had been a surprisingly practical one. 'I presume you have a downstairs office we can meet in.' Rachel was able to confirm that wouldn't be a problem.

When Jonathan Coulter arrived at the offices of Greenwood Solicitors four days later Rachel understood his ground-floor office request. Her new client was obviously seriously ill. He clattered into the reception area leaning heavily on a walking frame – the type with wheels, much favoured by old ladies who strung their shopping bags between the handles – but Jonathan Coulter was no old lady. He was a smartly dressed man in his late fifties/early sixties. He must, Rachel guessed, have been over six foot tall, though it was hard to tell, given his pronounced stoop – the result of him having to lean forward and steer the walker. It looked a very uncomfortable way of getting around. His movements as he headed towards Rachel were rapid, but unstable. The woman accompanying him, who was not introduced, stayed close behind, presumably ready to steady him, should she need to. He stuttered to an abrupt stop, raised himself nearly upright and extended his hand. As Rachel took it, she had to swiftly recalibrate, because Mr Coulter had no strength in his fingers. The resulting handshake was a light touch of palms and fingertips. It felt oddly intimate.

He grimaced. 'Sorry. It's the best I can do.'

‘Hello, Mr Coulter.’

‘Jonathan, please.’

Rachel smiled her acknowledgement. ‘It’s very nice to meet you. Please, come through.’ She turned and led the way. The clatter of the walking aid against the hardwood floor was loud – an erratic syncopation of frame and dragged footsteps. She slowed her pace.

Once inside the room, Jonathan collapsed into the proffered chair, with evident relief, and shoved the frame away. ‘Do me a favour, Lisa. Take this damn thing out with you, will you?’

‘Lisa’ grabbed hold of the contraption and backed out of the room, banging it against the paintwork on her way out. It was a small office, unsuited to cumbersome disability aids. As Lisa awkwardly pulled the door closed she said, ‘Of course.’ There was a beat. ‘But, please, shout me when you’re ready to leave.’

Jonathan bristled. ‘Message received and understood. No dancing out under my own steam, I promise.’

With Lisa gone, he shifted his body around awkwardly, obviously trying to get comfortable. He lifted his right hand with his left and positioned it on the arm of the chair. Rachel waited, respectfully trying to avoid watching as he reassembled himself. The end result was surprising. Once seated and settled, Jonathan Coulter seemed to lose ten years in age and gain five inches in stature. His face grew smoother, the tension dropped away and he smiled. He really was quite a good-looking man, with a strong jaw and intelligent eyes. His voice, though breathless, was deep, his accent hard to pin down.

‘Thank you for agreeing to our meeting today. I appreciate you fitting me in at such short notice. But, as you can see, getting my will sorted is something of a priority.’

Struggling to think of an appropriate response, Rachel pulled her notepad towards her and uncapped her pen. 'I'm listening.'

Which is what she'd done as Jonathan coolly and calmly laid out the plans for his estate after his demise. He was concise, reflective and, above all, rational. Rachel heard him out without interrupting – the same as she would any client – making a record of his wishes as he spoke. When he'd finished, she read back through her notes, buying time. Then she fulfilled her legal responsibilities by highlighting the difficulties inherent in his proposal and pointing out the potential consequences, intended and otherwise, of his approach. He listened politely – but respectfully, and very firmly, refused to change a thing or elaborate on his decisions.

By the end of their half-hour together, Rachel was in no doubt as to Jonathan's mental capacity, despite his very evident physical frailties. There was nothing left for her to do but fulfil his instructions.

That had been five months ago.

Now Jonathan was dead.

And within the hour his family would be arriving to hear his last will and testament.

Chapter 2

MEGAN PULLED the front door closed behind her, carefully. She didn't want Chloe to hear her leaving; she needed a little time to compose herself before the meeting at the solicitor's. It still felt wrong living in The View with Jonathan's youngest daughter. When Chloe had moved back home, just before Christmas – after Jonathan's symptoms had taken yet another turn for the worse – it had been positioned as a temporary arrangement. One designed to support Jonathan, help Megan and give Chloe some time to sort herself out – again. And although she couldn't deny that Jonathan had liked having his daughter around, Megan had not. For her, Chloe's presence had proved more of a strain than a help. Living under the same roof had certainly not brought the two of them any closer together. And now, in the wake of Jonathan's death, their very personal sorrow was only making that tension worse.

Hence Megan's need for half an hour on her own.

She walked up the driveway, glad to have escaped the claustrophobic confines of the house. The wind was a welcome

shock. Cold, unforgiving. It roused Megan. When she reached the top of the drive she stopped and looked back.

The View. An almost-grand, late-Victorian villa, built – according to Jonathan – by one of the town’s mayors for his son and family, in the days when nepotism was flaunted, and respected. The View epitomised solid, small-town wealth and ambition. It was a lovely house, with big rooms, high ceilings and ornate cornices. But it was the view out, as much as the space inside, that made the house special. From its vantage point, perched on the edge of the South Cliff, the views out across the bay were glorious. Megan had given up her life in Darlington, her friends, her job and her independence, to come and live with Jonathan in this large, looming house on the edge of a cliff, in a small seaside town, at the end of the line.

Five years.

So much happiness.

So much pain.

Had it been the right decision?

She was no longer sure.

The realisation that Jonathan was gone for ever thumped into her all over again, like a fist hitting a bruise, but she made herself keep moving. She turned onto Belvedere Avenue, leaving the house behind. Even buckled with grief, she knew that the sight and sound of the sea would be good for her soul. And her soul was sorely in need of something to soothe it.

When she reached The Esplanade she sat down on the first empty bench and looked out across the bay.

Jonathan was the first man to ever truly love Megan. He had made her feel simultaneously vulnerable and powerful; utterly confused and, at the same time, sure. She had known as soon

as she met him, at a teachers' conference in a faceless business centre in Newcastle, that there was something between them and that, if she pursued it, it would lead somewhere exciting, but scary. He was, of course, totally wrong for her. A married man. Much older than her. A respected professional colleague. He was exactly what she did not want – and yet she had.

And he had wanted her.

That had been both the problem and the joy.

An attraction that led to a flirtation. Texts and emails that blossomed into deep, interesting conversations. A craving that led to sex. Sex that deepened and strengthened their connection. The emergence of a deep and abiding affection – which turned into love.

Megan took three deep lung-filling breaths, trying to draw some of the calmness of the view inside herself. As much as she wanted to, she knew she couldn't stay where she was, clinging on to her memories of Jonathan. The clock was ticking. She had an appointment to keep.

The trouble was, she knew she was walking towards, not away from, more upset.

Jonathan's children, en masse. Her 'stepchildren' – in theory, but not in practice.

There were many reasons why Megan had never fulfilled the role of stepmother, not least because they already had a living, breathing and presumably loving mother. It had also been made painfully clear – by all three of them, in their own very different ways – that the last thing they wanted was the woman who had wrecked their parents' marriage 'playing Mum'.

Chloe, Noah and Liv.

Youngest to eldest.

Twenty-six, thirty-four, thirty-seven.

A Performing Arts graduate turned shop assistant. A travel rep turned hotel inspector. A star student turned A&E consultant.

‘Underdog’ to ‘top dog’.

Shambles to success.

Jonathan’s children.

There were so many different hierarchies at play. So much intertwined sibling history that she hadn’t been around to witness or shape. Even if they had been less hostile, Megan knew she would still have struggled. They were like a knot that was too tightly entangled to be unravelled, at least by her. The thought of having to face them at the solicitor’s, without Jonathan at her side, filled Megan with – she tried to identify the feeling pressing down on her – dread was probably the most honest answer.

She ‘got’ why they had never accepted her, and she understood why they would never forgive her. But surely, after all that had happened, there had to be a chance they might find it in their hearts to let old resentments go. They were all hurting. All grieving Jonathan’s loss. This surely was the moment for them to come together – share what they had in common, rather than dwell on what divided them.

The tide was beginning to retreat, leaving behind an arc of pristine wet sand. It was a beautiful blowy November day, fresh, clean. It gave Megan’s flattened spirits a nudge.

Perhaps the meeting would go okay.

Perhaps it would give her a chance to prove to them that she’d only ever wanted Jonathan – not what came with him, or after him.

Perhaps they would embrace and let old enmities die.

Perhaps.

Chapter 3

RACHEL HEWSON decided to take a stroll away from her desk. She had all the paperwork for the Coulter meeting in order. She'd mentally rehearsed what she was going to say and had speculated as to the questions they were likely to ask. She was ready. There was nothing more she could do.

She headed down the corridor into the small room next to the kitchen. The room was little more than a cupboard really. It was home to the Hoover, the reams of paper that they still went through and – the real motivation for Rachel's visit – the three video monitors. They'd had the security cameras fitted in the summer after an incident with an estranged, enraged husband who had felt the need to vent his frustrations on Greenwood's, having been explicitly prohibited from doing so on his long-suffering partner. The cameras covered the pavement in front of the offices, the conference room and reception area. Death and divorce were all good for business, but less so for tempers. Rachel hoped this wouldn't be the case with Jonathan Coulter's family – though given his idiosyncratic instructions, it was highly

likely that the meeting was not going to be straightforward.

Rachel scanned the monitors. By the look of it, the first member of the Coulter family had already arrived. She was fairly confident that the woman pecking at her mobile with slim fingers and glancing repeatedly out through the big plate-glass windows at the high street was Olivia, the eldest daughter. From the telephone conversations they'd had, and the follow-up confirmatory emails, it was obvious that Olivia had nominated herself 'head of the family', now that her father had passed. It was always useful to know who was the key decision-maker in inheritance cases. If you had a grasp of the dynamics within families and knew who had the most influence, who the least, it was sometimes possible to reduce the degree of conflict. Reduce, but not avoid it altogether. On the phone Olivia had been polite, organised, but she'd sounded hassled. All their exchanges had been about the practical arrangements, as if her priority was the speedy resolution of the matter rather than the substance of it. Rachel suspected that Olivia's perspective might well be about to change.

In the flesh, or at least in the grainy black-and-white image on the small screen, Olivia gave off the same sense of impatience as she had on the phone. A trait she'd inherited from her father, possibly? Even with the tremors caused by his illness, it had been obvious that Jonathan Coulter was a restless, energetic person. Children inherited so much from their parents – not just their money. People tended to focus on the similarities in appearance, but Rachel had worked with families where the link between the 'parent' and the 'child' was much more deep-seated; mannerisms, temperaments, values, indeed whole personalities were passed on through the genes.

A change in Olivia's posture alerted Rachel to the arrival of another member of the Coulter clan. Recognition bloomed on Olivia's face as the door to the offices opened. She rose from her seat and greeted the woman with a brief hug. This must be the younger sister, Chloe. They exchanged a few words that Rachel couldn't hear. The new arrival carried her grief more obviously than Olivia. It was evident in her posture and the way she shrugged off her coat as if the pockets were filled with bricks. Underneath she was wearing a plain shift dress that, through the unforgiving lens of the camera, looked very creased. The contrast between the two women was marked. Olivia – smartly dressed, poised, present. Chloe – dishevelled and curiously absent. Greetings over, the women chose their seats and looked away from each other.

Ten minutes later the door opened again and another young woman entered – in a flap – all scarves and apologetic gestures. Again there was a short dance of welcome, with brief hugs and limited words.

And then there were three.

The new arrival sat next to Olivia and struggled out of her jacket. Then, for a second, both women looked up and stared directly at Rachel through the camera lens. Two very different dress styles and manner, but the same eyes and shape of face. That's when Rachel realised her mistake.

There were not three relatives in reception, but two. The second woman to arrive had been Megan, Jonathan's partner, not his daughter.

Rachel's error brought a flush of embarrassment to her face, which she was thankful there was no one around to witness. She knew, of course, that Jonathan Coulter had been divorced and that his new partner was his junior by quite a few years, but seeing

the three woman together brought home how close in age the offspring and the new partner were. It was yet another ingredient that was bound to make the coming meeting fraught. As she watched them sitting there, not speaking, Rachel wondered if she was reading too much into the fact that the daughters had chosen to sit together – opposite, rather than next to, Jonathan’s partner, Megan. The poor woman! It was unprofessional to take sides, of course, and Rachel knew she would be scrupulously professional in her dealings with the Coulter family, but she couldn’t help but feel some sympathy for her.

God, she wished they could just crack on with the meeting.

But as the clock inched round to 10 a.m., they were still not ‘good to go’ because they remained one family member down.

The son.

Noah.

Chapter 4

LIV WONDERED how many hours of her life she'd spent waiting for Noah – and apologising for him. The solicitor, Ms Hewson, was polite, but her appearance in the reception area and her mention of *another client meeting at midday* was obviously a gentle reminder that their needs were no different from, or more important than, anyone else's. Damn Noah! He'd promised he'd be on time and for once she'd believed him, because who – other than a complete embarrassment of a human being – would turn up late for the 'reading' of their own father's will?

She should've known better.

She did know better.

Olivia couldn't think of a single occasion when Noah had been on time. Lateness was 'his thing'. Over the years the whole family had learnt to accept it – though that didn't stop them resenting it. Eight-year-old Liv sitting in the car every morning before school, fretting about missing registration. Teenage Liv pacing the departure lounge at airports with their parents, waiting for Noah to come back from the shops, the toilet, the games arcade

–wherever – so that they could board just before they closed the gate, under the baleful gaze of all the already-seated passengers. Liv’s childhood felt like one long wait for Noah. Even now as adults, with full-time jobs and families of their own, it was the same. Every Christmas Day for the past few years had been spiked with a huge dose of non-festive frustration – Freddie and Arthur building themselves up into a frenzy of anticipation – having to wait for ‘Uncle No’ to appear, so that they could open their presents with Grandpa or Grandma, depending on whose year it was to host. He did it every single time they got together, and it drove Liv mad. Today was no different, though even by Noah’s standards, this was a new low.

As they waited, Liv sneaked a glance at Megan, wondering what was going on behind her blank expression. Liv didn’t know where to start with that one. What to say that didn’t sound contrived and insincere. If Noah had been on time, this awkward hiatus could have been avoided. They would all be in the room by now, being briefed by Ms Hewson. And once they’d been briefed, they could all flee back to their own lives, free to negotiate the shock and awkwardness of their father’s sudden, though expected death in private – which was where Liv preferred to experience any emotion.

Megan coughed, quietly, surprising them all. Her hand flew to her mouth as if she was embarrassed to have made a sound. She looked shattered, but then she would be. Liv knew how difficult the past couple of years had been for Megan. Though Liv found her a hard person to warm to, there was no doubting how dedicated she’d been to their father. Had it not been for Megan, Liv’s own life would have been much more complicated by her father’s illness. He would have needed far more support and that

burden would, inevitably, have fallen to her. Chloe? Not really her wheelhouse. Noah? He would have promised a lot, then delivered very little, if past and present performance was anything to go by. Where the hell was he? Liv wondered what Megan would do now. No partner, no kids, no real roots in Scarborough, no home... unless their father really had done something unthinkable in his will – which she was ninety-nine per cent certain he wouldn't have. Not their family home!

Liv got up and paced.

She wanted this meeting over and done with. Her job left very little over by way of energy and thinking time – factor in two small children and a husband she saw only briefly, and Liv's plate was already full. The idea that it could be about to get even fuller made her feel anxious. She turned away from the thought. It was too stressful. She had, of course, known her father was dying, they all had, but she had not expected him to die so suddenly. She'd been confident they would have one more Christmas together. The arrival of a book on John Coltrane from Amazon the day before, one of his gifts, had only served to remind her how misplaced that confidence had been. She was a doctor – she should have known better. But predicting the end of a life, especially one ravaged by disease, was always extremely difficult. Standing in the outer office of the solicitor's waiting for the meeting to begin, Liv felt uncharacteristically panicked by the weight of responsibility pressing down on her.

The thought that they might have to reschedule the meeting made her want to punch something – very hard. When Noah finally appeared, twenty excruciating minutes later, it was only the presence of the receptionist that stopped it being her brother.

Chapter 5

BY THE time they were finally settled in the meeting room, Rachel's nerves had been sharpened by a touch of irritation. She tried not to let it show.

She began briskly. 'What I'm going to do today is explain the provisions that Jonathan has put in place for the dispersal of his assets. I'll also take a few minutes at the end to talk you through the rights and responsibilities of executors. It helps if everyone is on the same page. Each executor will be given a copy of the will to take away with them today. We retain the original for safe-keeping.'

Nobody said anything. They all waited, trying hard not to look too eager, or too interested, or on edge, or any of the things that they were, no doubt, actually feeling.

Rachel went on, taking care to make sure she scanned the room as she spoke – inclusivity was important. 'Alongside his will, Jonathan also put together a Statement of Wishes. It's because of the stipulations in this statement that I wanted to get you all together, in person. I do appreciate you making the effort

to come into the office today.' The glance Liv gave her brother at this point was not friendly. Rachel forced herself to concentrate. 'I have received apologies from Ms Eloise Coulter. I assume one of you will update her on our meeting.'

They all nodded, with the exception of Megan.

'Rather unusually, Jonathan asked me to read out his Statement of Wishes before I distribute his will.' She slid the statement out of her file. 'If we're all ready?' They gave their assent. She felt a red flush begin to creep up her neck above the collar of her shirt. 'Just to clarify, a Statement of Wishes is quite common nowadays. Many people write one in order to express their views with regard to the details of their funeral, any specific bequests or gifts, and so on.' She picked up the sheet. 'Jonathan's statement is a little more particular.' She looked down, then paused again. 'I should make it clear that a Statement of Wishes is the expression of an individual's desires, but it isn't a legally binding document. I thought you should know that – in the circumstances.'

The prevarication was obviously infuriating them. The atmosphere in the room teetered on the edge of exasperation.

Rachel pushed her glasses up her nose and began. Jonathan's words, accented by her faint Welsh lilt, filled the room:

'Dear Liv, Noah and Chloe,

If you're listening to this being read out at the solicitor's, then I'm sorry, it has obviously beaten me. That's okay, I suppose. Something gets us all eventually. It's just bad luck that my end has come much sooner than I would have liked.

Knowing that you are dying is remarkably helpful in making you focus on what really matters. The problem is, it doesn't, unfortunately, endow you with any profound insights

into how to deal with the consequences of your death. Indeed, I've found the opposite. Knowing that my time is limited has led me to reflect more on the mistakes I've made in my life, especially as a husband and a father, rather than on the successes. I'm hoping that I managed the grandpa bit okay? Or at least I did until I became so sodding useless.'

At this point Rachel paused and took a sip of water.

'I used to think of myself as a fair man and not a selfish one, but I've come to realise that neither of those descriptions is true. On reflection, I realise I've chosen a route through life that has been in my own best interest. Some of those decisions have been at the cost of others – especially, ironically, the people I love most. For that, I am truly sorry.

I am determined not to make the same mistake in death.

Hence my will.

I hope you understand, respect and execute my wishes.

I have every faith you will.

I ask that you do your best.

I hope your best is better than mine.

Dad

P.S. Knowing how long it takes you three to agree on anything, I've added a small incentive to the situation. I FORBID YOU TO HOLD MY FUNERAL UNTIL EVERYTHING IS SETTLED.'

Having got through the statement, Rachel leant back in her chair and waited for the implications to sink in. At her elbow sat a small stack of snow-white envelopes – Jonathan's will. The

siblings had all studiously avoided looking at them while she was talking. Perhaps they thought such attention would appear too nakedly eager. Now they stared. Only Jonathan's partner, Megan, didn't shift her gaze. She continued to focus on the small window over Rachel's left shoulder – the window that faced out onto a brick wall. Randomly Rachel remembered her old ballet teacher telling the class that if they kept their eyes on a fixed spot, it would stop them wobbling as they did their spins. Maybe Megan was practising the same discipline.

Rachel acquiesced to their silent request. 'I think it best if you read the will itself.' She picked up the envelopes, stood and walked around the table. She placed a copy in front of each of the siblings.

There was no envelope for Megan.

No one moved for a beat of one, two, three; on beat four, Noah reached out his hand, prompting Liv to snatch up her copy. Chloe followed suit.

Rachel watched Megan flinch as they tore open their envelopes, but she kept her chin held high. Rachel felt a flush of admiration and pity for her. For a minute the only movement was the blinking of their eyelids as each of the siblings read the enclosed document.

Noah was the first to register his response – 'What the fuck!' – said with energy, shock and, to Rachel's ears, a note of amusement.

The older sister, Olivia, hadn't finished reading. She held up her hand, warding off his pre-emptive reaction. The younger sister, Chloe, was alternating between reading and looking up in bewilderment. 'I don't understand. Hasn't he left any other instructions?'

Noah answered her, somewhat sharply. 'Chloe, it's not complicated. Dad's left it to us to decide.'

Liv turned the page, obviously looking for more than the scant six paragraphs. There was no more.

Rachel had put the will together for Jonathan. She'd even sourced the witnesses to sign it, when Jonathan explained that he wanted its contents to remain confidential until his death. He had been very explicit about that. She knew exactly what the will said. It was succinct. Short on words, but not on implications.

Liv had reached the end of the document – her second read-through. She laid the papers down on the table. 'Well, this is going to take some sorting out.'

'You can say that again, Sis.' Noah seemed to be enjoying the confusion in the room. It was insensitive, especially with Megan sitting there silently and stoically at the end of the table.

'Was there another will? Before this one?'

Rachel had wondered how soon they'd get round to that. Liv was the quickest off the mark. 'There was an original will, written and amended in the 1980s, when you were young children. Then changes were made after your parents got divorced in...' she checked her well-prepared notes; she'd known this wasn't going to be a straightforward meeting, '2015.'

'And when was this version written?' The older sister again.

'Jonathan approached the firm in early June to get the ball rolling. It was signed off, as you can see by the date, on the twenty-eighth of the same month.'

As if choreographed, all three siblings sat back in their chairs simultaneously, absorbing the information that the will was only five months old.

The pause was broken by Megan, who asked in a quiet voice, 'What does it say?'

Megan had not been given a copy of the document, as was

correct. She had not been named as an executor and, therefore, had no legal right to know what instructions the will contained. Jonathan's insistence on this had puzzled and troubled Rachel, but she had been in no position to query it. It was none of her business. A client's wishes were to be recorded and executed, not challenged.

A silent exchange of glances between the siblings landed the problem of Megan firmly at Liv's door. She picked up her copy, hesitated, then – instead of passing it over to Megan – began reading its contents aloud, her voice steady and even-paced:

*'The Last Will and Testament of Jonathan Avery Coulter,
28 June 2019*

- *I appoint my children, Olivia Louise Redpath, Noah Avery Coulter and Chloe Emma Coulter, as joint executors of my estate.*
 - *There is only one specific bequest to be made:*
 - *A cash lump sum of £5,000 to Lisa Joanne Browne, who currently resides at 12 Prospect Close, Scarborough, YO12 6EN.*
- *I leave the remainder of my estate, in its entirety – including all my remaining financial assets (after any debts are paid), including the house at 67 Belvedere Avenue, Scarborough, YO11 2UU, and all its contents, etc. – to my executors.*
- *My executors must agree unanimously on the fair and appropriate division and distribution of the estate.*
- *Should my executors be unable to reach such an agreement, the proceeds of my estate will go – in its entirety – to the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Francis Crick House, 6 Summerhouse Road, Moulton Park, Northampton, NN3 6BJ, tel. no. 01604 250505.*

- *I appoint Rachel Hewson of Greenwood Solicitors to fulfil the instructions of my executors.*

While Liv read out the stark paragraphs, Rachel studied Megan. She sat remarkably still, her expression guarded. The only discernible sign of stress was the way she kept pressing down on the nail of her little finger with her thumb. When Liv finished, Rachel felt compelled to offer Megan something other than words. 'Ms Brooke, would you like a glass of water?' But Megan shook her head.

The awkwardness was just as Rachel had feared. She began to fill the silence with well-intentioned waffle.

'I appreciate that it's going to take you some time to talk this through and reach your conclusions. I want to stress that your father's "conditions" are not legally enforceable. I would strongly advise you *not* to rush into any decisions regarding the estate, despite your father's injunction. And, as his surviving family, the nature of his funeral service is entirely up to you.'

They made no move.

It was Megan who stirred. She pushed her chair away from the table and stood up. 'I'll leave you to it.' Her voice broke the impasse. They all shifted in their seats. Rachel admired Megan's calmness, or at least her pretence of it. Megan made for the door. Rachel stood up, intending to follow her out. She had a duty of care to the whole family, not only the executors.

'Before you go.' Noah stopped her departure.

Rachel turned in the doorway. 'Yes?' She wished he would just spit it out. She didn't want Megan to leave before she had a chance to speak to her.

'I've got a question.' He paused. 'Who the hell is Lisa Browne?'

Chapter 6

WITH MEGAN and the solicitor out of the room, the brakes came off.

‘Did you know about this?’ Noah was first on the offensive.

‘No, of course not!’ Liv responded. ‘You?’

‘No!’ Noah replied. They stared at each other.

‘Neither did I, if either of you is interested.’ Chloe’s jibe went unnoticed.

‘So who did you think was his executor?’ Noah asked.

‘Well, me, as the eldest. He asked me ages ago.’ Liv picked up the will again and scanned the totally unhelpful instructions. She really could do without this. The panicky, sick feeling in her stomach increased.

‘And of course you assumed it was just you he wanted.’ Noah’s sarcasm was sharp and squarely directed at Liv.

She was not in the mood for it. ‘Oh, don’t start getting snippy. I thought it was going to be a straightforward, but not inconsiderable, admin job. He gave me the impression that everything was sorted out. That he’d left clear instructions for me

– or whoever – to execute. I had no idea about this.’ She waved the will around. ‘He did mention that he was going to update his will, but he didn’t go into any details.’

‘And you didn’t ask?’ Noah didn’t look convinced.

‘It didn’t seem appropriate, in the circumstances. I didn’t want him thinking I was prying... or questioning his capacity. You know what he was like about stuff like that, especially as he got sicker.’

‘Don’t you think it’s weird there’s no mention of Mum? Nothing at all? Or Megan?’ Chloe said.

‘Yet there’s five thousand pounds for this Lisa Browne character.’ It was obviously still niggling Noah that such a large sum had been set aside for someone who didn’t even register on his radar.

‘She’s not “a character”!’ Liv made air quotes. ‘She’s the carer who has been helping to look after Dad.’

‘Which one?’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Noah. The one who’s been virtually living in the house for the past few months. Since his last fall,’ Chloe said. ‘You must have met her.’

Noah nudged the indignation back a notch. ‘Oh, yeah.’ He made a show of looking like he was remembering. ‘Now I come to think about, I did meet her once or twice at the house.’

‘On one of your rare visits.’

Noah didn’t react to Liv’s dig. He was still worrying away at the bequest to Ms Browne. ‘It’s a lot of cash, for someone who was only doing her job.’

‘Noah! Don’t you think the money for the carer is less of an issue than the conditions of the will itself? Why has Dad left it to us to decide?’ Liv asked. ‘And Chloe’s right. Why hasn’t he made

any specific provision for Mum, or for Megan? What the hell is that about?’

‘How should I know? He never really talked about money with me.’ Noah had a habit of taking personally questions about his relationship with his father.

Liv was trying to think logically rather than emotionally. Their father had liked to be in the driving seat. Being in control had always been important to him – sometimes more important than was good for him, or for those close to him. The will, and the bizarre accompanying statement, was completely out of character.

Unless...

Liv’s brain ticked.

Unless the will was their father’s reaction to the decline in his mental and physical powers. A rational, if atypical, recognition that he was no longer able to make clear, coherent decisions. Intelligence and confusion were uncomfortable bedfellows. The thought saddened Liv profoundly. ‘Maybe he was worse than we realised. Maybe he was worried that he wasn’t well enough to apportion his legacy appropriately.’ She began to warm to her explanation. The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. ‘Maybe he came to the realisation that it was better to let us decide.’ It was possible. His health had been deteriorating. The will could be his solution. Perhaps their father’s last act of self-determination had been to allow them to negotiate their own inheritance.

‘So he left it up to us,’ Noah stated.

‘Looks like it,’ Liv agreed.

‘You’re not suggesting we do it *now*?’ Chloe asked, shocked and scrambling to keep up.

‘No, of course not,’ Liv snapped. She regretted her tone when she saw Chloe wince. She made a real effort to keep her voice level and soft. ‘But we are going to have to start getting our heads round it – and sooner rather than later. There’s a lot to think through. We’ll need to get together again.’ The thought of that made Liv feel claustrophobic, but there was no avoiding it. Her mind started clicking through her schedule, working out what could be moved, what covered by Angus, what would have to be sacrificed. Family logistics: yet another of her areas of expertise and responsibility. She was so focused on her thoughts that she didn’t hear Noah’s comment, only Chloe’s response.

‘Noah! Don’t! I can’t bear to think about him like that.’

‘Like what?’ Liv asked, forcing her attention back into the room.

Chloe had her hands up to her face, as if shielding herself from Noah’s words. ‘Lying somewhere on his own, waiting for us to make a decision.’

Liv shot Noah a look – he really should know better than to bring up their dad’s ghoulish edict not to bury him until they had divided the estate, especially not in front of Chloe. She steered the conversation back to practicalities. ‘What about getting together Thursday this week? I’m not working. We could meet somewhere halfway, a hotel or somewhere.’

‘Thursday’s not good for me,’ Noah said.

‘Or me,’ Chloe added.

Liv had to bite her tongue. It couldn’t be that hard for a part-time sales assistant to swop a shift, surely. ‘Well, the rest of the week is impossible for me,’ she countered. ‘What if you two came over to ours one evening?’

‘I can’t. I’m already away two nights next week, as it is. A last-minute job in Malaga. Josie will have a dicky fit if I say I’m coming to yours for a night, on top of that.’

And on it went.

After fifteen minutes of fractious discussion about which date would fit into everyone’s schedule, and the best venue for their meeting, the only issue that was clear was that Jonathan had been absolutely right about one thing: getting the three of them to agree on anything was virtually impossible.

Chapter 7

MEGAN DIDN'T wait to say her goodbyes. She turned down Ms Hewson's offer of tea and sympathy, wanting to put as much distance between herself and Jonathan's offspring as possible.

In the taxi she caught her breath.

She wondered what was going on back at the solicitor's. She imagined their surprise, and delight. Jonathan had cut her out of his will and given them free rein. She wondered what they would do with it.

She looked out of the window and watched the world pass by. The rootless feeling that had haunted her since his death intensified. She was heading back to a home that was effectively no longer hers, to a life with no purpose, to a future that was hard to imagine.

The taxi turned onto Ramshill and headed along the Esplanade. The tide was fully out now, revealing a wide band of gleaming smooth sand. On a whim, she asked the driver to pull over and drop her off. His concerned, *Are you sure, love? It's blowing a gale out there* was appreciated, but ignored. She paid and watched him

swing the car around and head back into town, hunting for another fare. He was right, the wind was still strong. Her cheeks hurt as if they'd been slapped. But it was better than the oppressive heat at the solicitor's. She started walking, relishing the fight against the elements. It was perfect weather for her grief, and anger. She walked until she was warm, her eyes watering, her lungs full of cold air. Blood pumped through her system, expanding her sore heart. Just before the clock tower she took the path down to the Italian Gardens, out of the worst of the wind. She couldn't face going back to the house and the clamour of mounting questions that couldn't be answered by the empty rooms.

At this time of year the gardens were bleak, a pattern of neat circles of heavy clay soil, empty of plants. Everything was sodden. At the heart of the gardens was a shallow pond choked with dead bulrushes. In the centre, Eros balanced precariously on his weather-beaten globe, his arm reaching out into thin air. At either end of the gardens stood two ornately painted wooden shelters, now faded and in need of repair. They dated back to the glory days of Scarborough, when the great and the good used to the promenade along the South Cliff – looking down on the great unwashed below. Megan chose the shelter on the left. Inside, the sound of the waves was muffled, the force of the wind diminished. *D loves G 4ever* was scrawled in marker pen on the chalky wall. The place was scruffy, but at least it was peaceful.

She was not.

What she felt – what had begun coursing through her in that claustrophobic room as the solicitor had spoken so smoothly and professionally – was rage. It was a fury not directed at Ms Hewson, with her smart suit and kind face, or at Liv, or Chloe; not even at Noah, with his rudeness and insensitivity; but at Jonathan. For

everything. Her emotions crackled. She had thought she couldn't feel any worse than she already did, but she'd been wrong. She was incensed with him.

For sneaking off to the solicitor's without telling her.

For spending weeks, if not months, secretly planning the whole charade.

For letting her walk into that meeting unprepared.

For thinking the whole thing was some sort of game that he could control from beyond his as-yet-unfilled grave.

For handing everything over to his kids.

For bowing to their resentment and cutting her out, just as they, she suspected, had wanted him to.

For abandoning her to face this on her own.

And on top of all that – as if that wasn't enough – she was blindingly, roaringly furious at him for dying.

She had stayed with him through it all, and yet he had not stayed with her. And for that she was livid.

He had left her.

He had given up.

She had so many things she wanted to say that she would now never be able to. There was so much pent-up emotion inside her that had no possible outlet.

His dying was *selfish*.

He had been *selfish*.

There, she had finally admitted it to herself.

Megan banged her fists down on the bench. Once, twice, three, four, five times – harder and harder – trying to release some of the fury that had been building up since his death. No, that wasn't true. The rage had been brewing inside her for far longer. It had been bubbling under the surface throughout the

seemingly endless, stressful months of being trapped in the house with Jonathan. It had fermented silently inside her with every long, slow hour that she'd dedicated to loving and caring for him. Her secret rage had, it now felt, always been there, the dark underside to all that incessant positivity and hope.

Throughout his illness she had put his needs first, subsumed her own. Her sole objective had been to make his life as good as possible. She had changed shape around him. Reinvented herself to become the carer that his illness demanded, rather than the lover and partner she had once been.

She had been selfless.

And yet, all that time, he'd been planning and plotting behind her back, drafting this elaborate ending to their story.

Damn him.

Damn him.

Damn him!

Her tantrum raged and she indulged it. She let her grief flood out, feeling the scorch in her nose and throat. On and on it burnt – until there was no more fuel left.

The gardens came back into focus. Eros hadn't moved. The wind was still blowing off the sea, and Jonathan was still dead. There was still today, and tomorrow, and all the other days after that to be got through. There was still the house – for a while at least – and his family to endure. And there were still Jonathan's last wishes to be observed, before his soul could be put to rest.